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TAGS: PHUM PGOV KPAO SI

SUBJECT: SLOVENIA: GOVERNMENT AND MEDIA REACTION TO THE
2006 HUMAN RIGHTS REPORT

REF: 2006 LJUBLJANA 173

Classified By: COM for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (C) SUMMARY. The 2006 Human Rights Report (HRR) generated extensive reaction from the Government of Slovenia (GoS), opposition party leaders, and the media. In general, government ministries offered an upbeat assessment, accentuating positive comments, minimizing criticism, and expressing pleasure at the overall report. That said, the Ministry of the Interior (MOI) contested some statements and private reaction from Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) leaders indicated the GoS's "disappointment" and "hurt feelings" about criticism levied in the report. Opposition leaders were also generally positive regarding the report's findings and credibility. While they exploited passages for their own political agendas, the opposition was less fiery in their rhetoric against the government than last year. All major Slovenian media organizations covered the HRR release, issuing straightforward reports with a minimum of commentary.

The intense interest in the HRR, particularly at the highest levels of Slovenian government, showcases the charm offensive led by the GoS on human rights issues, and post is confident the GoS will continue to put forward strong efforts to influence the HRR again next year. There have been some concrete improvements, most notably in trafficking in persons. Nevertheless, the GoS continues to focus on correcting perceived errors in the report rather than tackling the tough issues and briefing us on the practical effects of their work. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (U) The 2006 Human Rights Report was released at four o'clock in the afternoon local time on March 6. An op-ed written by COM was placed in national daily Vecer that day highlighting that the HRR would be released, explaining the background of the report, and detailing why the State Department writes it each year. At the time of its release, the report was sent to key contacts in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. On March 7, Post's Information Resource Center Director emailed the report to an extensive list of human rights contacts. The report is also posted prominently on post's external website. A Slovenian language version of the HRR Introduction and Slovenian portion will be posted on the website by the end of March.

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GOS Public Response: MFA, MOJ and Ministry of Culture Spin Positive, while Interior Cries Foul
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¶3. (SBU) The Ministry of Foreign Affairs released a press notice on March 7 "welcoming the findings," saying that the report was: "positive in general," that it noted progress in a number of areas, and that the State Department grasped the complexity of the issues Slovenia faces. It also welcomed

the report's inclusion of GoS actions to tackle issues like trafficking in persons (TIP) and Roma integration. The Ministry of Justice responded positively as well, saying that the inclusion of the court backlogs was "not a surprise" and indicating that this was "extra stimulus for the implementation of the (backlog-fighting) Lukenda project." The Ministry of Culture was positive overall, calling the media freedom portion of the report "extremely favorable" and downplaying reports of indirect government influence by saying that the HRR contained only "reports" of indirect government influence while it listed as "fact" that individuals were free to criticize the government publicly or privately without reprisal. In contrast, the Ministry of the Interior took a more negative stance, with a press notice on March 9 that disagrees with the report's findings on asylum policies, treatment of the "erased," and excessive use of force by the police. The MOI contested the report's statement that some asylum applications may get cursory review, said its solution to the "erased" problem -- a constitutional law -- was being delayed by opposition parties, and rejected comments about excessive use of police force.

Private Face at MFA Differs from the Public One

¶4. (C) MFA Officials were more mixed in their private response to the report. Approximately one hour after the HRR's release on March 6, Foreign Minister Dimitrij Rupel called COM complaining that the Slovenes were "hurt" by it, but admitting that he had not actually read the report yet. Later that day, Slovenian Ambassador to the United States Samuel Zbogar told Deputy Assistant Secretary Mark Pekala,

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during a previously scheduled meeting, that the MFA is very pleased with the report, and views it as well reasoned and very appropriate. He noted that the GoS appreciated that the report mentions progress on several issues, not just areas that need improvement.

¶5. (C) On March 8, DCM Maryruth Coleman and PolOff met with Anita Pipan, the Director General of Multilateral Issues at the MFA, to discuss the report. Pipan began by echoing the positive comments in the MFA's public response, thanking the Embassy for acknowledging Slovenia's positive overall human rights record and working hard to delve into the details of some of the more complex issues. That said, she indicated that the first reaction at the MFA was "disappointment and surprise" with the report. Pipan delivered a lengthy set of comments on the HRR, going through the document point by point where the GoS felt that it could be improved. She hit on all of the most contentious issues in the report including the treatment of the Roma, the problem of the "erased," court backlogs, media freedom, and asylum regulations, as well as several smaller, less politically sensitive issues like domestic violence and police use of excessive force. Criticism followed the format that the GoS presented last year in reaction to the report and the conversation closely mirrored previous meetings in March of 2006 and January 2007.

¶6. (C) Delving into specifics, Pipan said that the GoS felt language on excessive force by the police was too strong and noted that one of the police investigations mentioned had come to the conclusion that excessive force had not been used. She was positive on the court backlogs section, but mentioned that the GoS expects significant improvements in the situation in 2007, when the bulk of the results are expected from the Ministry of Justice's "Lukenda Project." She was particularly concerned about the HRR's section on media freedom, stating that there is no state ownership of media companies and that there is no analysis from the government or any NGOs that prove journalists self-censor. She was displeased with the comments on discrimination

against Jews, saying it was "really difficult for the government to do anything about this" but noting that they had sponsored anti-discrimination seminars for civil servants. On asylum issues, Pipan strongly disputed the findings of the report, stating that all asylum seekers know their rights because "officials are required to tell them" and that Slovenia "falls in line with EU standards."

¶17. (C) Pipan defended the government's policy of giving special rights to "official" minorities from Hungary and Italy, while offering different treatment for minorities from the former Yugoslav republics. She explained that this is how the issue is treated in the Slovenian constitution, that it is the will of the people, and that regardless of technical rights, "everyone is actually protected." Pipan expressed appreciation that the HRR pointed out progress the GoS is making on trafficking in persons, and said they were glad to see that the report "tries hard to acknowledge activities the GoS has taken." Regarding women's issues, she said that the Ministry of Labor is increasing shelter facilities and that the Ministry of Justice has talked about criminalizing domestic violence. She also pointed out that prostitution has been decriminalized and disputed the HRR's figures on pay gaps, saying the accurate figure is 8 percent difference in pay between men and women, not 10 percent. Pipan repeated long-standing GoS explanations disputing the HRR's comments on de-facto segregation of Roma in schools (by saying differentiation is based on ability not ethnicity), said the "erased" had already had numerous opportunities to resolve their status, and commented that the case of the Strojan family was misleading because readers would not know the circumstances of their "resettlement." In contrast with her very detailed concerns, Pipan repeatedly thanked the Embassy for writing a report that "aims to present the complexities" of some of the more difficult human rights challenges in Slovenia.

¶18. (C) Overall, Pipan stressed that the MFA felt that the report could have been improved if post had consulted more with the government to "give context" to the issues. She mentioned that the report does not include various international treaties Slovenia has ratified on human rights and is not organized to include EU standards for human rights -- citing the death penalty as an example. She was also concerned that the HRR practice of listing specific incidents draws undue negative attention to the issues and prevents readers from understanding issues in a broader context, and that the reputation of the GoS was being unfairly besmirched because of some problems in the report for which the government has no control (citing Roma child marriage and

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private anti-Semitism as examples).

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Opposition Less Fiery with HRR Rhetoric than Last Year
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¶19. (SBU) In contrast to last year (reftel), opposition lawmakers were less vocal in using the HRR to criticize the current government and its handling of human rights issues. Left-of-center Social Democrats (SD) lawmaker Majda Potrata, the President of the Parliamentary Commission for Petitions, Human Rights, and Equal Opportunities, and opposition left-of-center Liberal Democracy Party (LDS) leader Darja Lavitizar Bebler said the report was highly credible, included all of Slovenia's major human rights challenges, and highlighted poor treatment given to minority and vulnerable groups. One exception was Matej Lahovnik, leader of an association of left-of-center members of parliament, who highlighted the media freedom section of the report as "a very serious warning...that Slovenia took a step backwards in media freedom." The dramatic use of HRR language in parliamentary debates last year has yet to be seen in regards to the HRR 2006.

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Media Emphasize Challenges, Particularly Media Freedom
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¶110. (U) All major Slovenian media organizations covered the release of the 2006 HRR, giving it straightforward coverage with a minimum of commentary. Wire service STA reprinted the opening paragraph of the report and highlighted the HRR's passages on court backlogs, trafficking, media freedom, religious freedom, refugee rights, and the "erased" in two reports. On March 7, leading daily Delo carried a front page report detailing major human rights violators around the world and a more in-depth article on the foreign policy page that covered both the full report and the Slovenian section. Daily Dnevnik led with a front page article titled "USA on Human Rights in Slovenia: Good, But..." that echoed the HRR's message about the generally good state of human rights in Slovenia but listed the handful of continuing problems that the report details. Dnevnik also includes a more in-depth report on the state of Slovenia's Roma population titled "USA Warns About Slovene Attitude Toward Roma." Dnevnik carried a second Roma-related article on March 8, comparing the HRR's 2005 and 2006 coverage of the Roma and detailing other differences in the HRR between last year and this year. A March 8 commentary in Dnevnik titled "America's Mirror to the World and Itself," stated that the HRR is the most widely read State Department publication, that its coverage is not a surprise, and that any positive assessment should not be overshadowed by the need to address remaining human rights problems, most importantly those that are repeated each year in the HRR. Another Dnevnik article March 8 criticized the government's "satisfaction" with the report, saying that it was not appropriate for the GoS to be satisfied given the criticisms raised in the HRR, and the fact that "some warnings have been repeated for years."

¶111. (U) March 8 coverage in daily Vecer focused on the media freedom section of the HRR, comparing the 2005 and 2006 sections on the media with the headline "USA: Media in Slovenia are Plural," but also pointing out critical remarks that remain in the report, including language on indirect government influence on the media. March 10 coverage in leading left-of-center newsmagazine Mladina, headlined "Influence on Journalists and Media is 'Indirect,'" also focused on media freedom and included a response to the HRR from the Ministry of Culture. A brief article in the March 10 edition of daily Dnevnik covered a statement from the Liberal Academy, an "independent association of politically engaged intellectuals," that criticizes the Ministry of Culture's efforts to note the positive remarks in the HRR while "overlooking the criticism." The Liberal Academy, whose membership includes former high level officials from left-of-center parties, said they observed "increasing pressure on journalists" and restrictions on the space available in media for government criticism.

¶112. (U) Television news broadcasts on national channel TV Slovenia, commercial channel POP TV, and radio news broadcast on national radio station Radio Slovenia also gave the report prominent, straightforward coverage. Potshots at the U.S. human rights record from the generally skeptical Slovenian press were rare, brief, and followed by commentary that reaffirmed the value and objectivity of the report.

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Comment

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¶113. (C) COMMENT. Given the upcoming prominence of holding the EU Presidency and Slovenia's efforts to win a seat on the United Nation's Human Rights Council, the GoS strenuously pushed post for a very positive Human Rights Report in 2006. Their reaction to the report -- which was consistent with previous reports -- was disappointment and, curiously, as

both the Foreign Minister and his staff told EmbOffs, "hurt feelings." The MFA's frustration likely comes from disappointment that its charm offensive in Ljubljana and Washington did not result in a significantly less critical report and that Slovenia continues to take criticism for a lengthy list of smaller problems despite the generally positive state of human rights here. The MFA's reaction is surprising, and begs the question of whether the GoS (1) feels the human rights challenges are not really challenges at all, or (2) thinks it can reeducate the international community to accept its view of the problems. There have been some concrete improvements, most notably in trafficking in persons. Nevertheless, the GoS continues to focus on correcting perceived errors in the report rather than tackling the tough issues and briefing us on the practical effects of their work. Post is confident that the GoS will continue to put forward strong efforts to influence the HRR again next year. END COMMENT.

COLEMAN